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ABSTRACT

A study examined peer group writing evaluation in the classroom. Freshmen in expository writing classes were trained at the beginning of the semester to respond first to the ideas in the essays, and only after giving the writer feedback on this level were they to help the writer with mechanics and syntax. After being divided into groups of four or five, the students read their first drafts aloud, with each peer in turn criticizing the writer's work orally and in written comments on the copies. These comments were used in writing second drafts, which were turned in to the teacher, whose comments were then used for the final draft. The peer groups generally followed the same pattern of development. In the early stages, the majority of comments were positive evaluations of a writer's work. Along with these supportive comments were criticisms of content and form, which the writers did not always use in their revisions (reflecting their resentment at being criticized by someone other than the teacher, as well as a lack of experience in revision). Comments about grammar, punctuation, and syntax were more helpful. The peers were able to pinpoint surface level problems and offer solutions. As the semester progressed, the peers began to suggest ways that the writer might revise a text instead of merely criticizing the writer. (HTH)

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CS 207 000

Peer Groups in the Composition Classroom: A Case Study

By Nina D. Ziv

Like many composition teachers, I have been using the workshop approach in my classroom for several years. The focus of this approach is the peer writing group in which student writers share and criticize each others work. I adopted this approach because it appeared to be a good teaching technique and because it received rave reviews from writers such as James Moffett, Peter Elbow, Thom Hawkins, and Ken Bruffee. Despite the praise heaped upon this technique, I have been alternately disappointed and elated about the how these groups have functioned in my classroom. In order to better understand how these groups operate, I conducted a study of peer group interaction in my classroom. The participants in this project were freshmen in my expository writing classes at New York University and Seton Hall University. At the beginning of the semester, I trained the participants to respond to essays. Using suggestions from Elbow's Writing Without Teachers and Hawkins' Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing, I emphasized that students should respond first to the ideas in the essays and only after giving the writer feedback on this level should the students help the writer on the sentential and lexical levels.

After the training sessions, I divided the classes up into groups of four or five students and instructed the students to write their first drafts at home and bring in these drafts to class with enough copies for their peers.

The students then read their papers aloud and each peer in turn criticized the writer's work orally and in written comments on the copies. The sessions of two groups at Seton Hall and three groups at NYU were tape recorded. After these sessions, the students would use the peer comments to write second drafts which they turned in to me. After I commented on their papers, the students used my comments to write final drafts. In addition to taping the peer group sessions, I interviewed representative students in each class at the beginning and end of the semester about their writing experiences and their experiences in peer groups.

My findings indicate that peer groups generally followed the same pattern of development. In the early stages, the majority of the comments were positive evaluations of a writer's work such as "I like your idea" or "good paper." While these comments did not give the writers feedback on the content of their work, they were worthwhile responses because at this point students were just beginning to learn to work together as a group and positive evaluations of their writing made group members feel comfortable with one another. Students also engaged in "small talk" about things unrelated to their writing. It is easy to dismiss such talk as a waste of time; however, I think it is important to remember that when they enter our classes, many of the students have never participated in such groups and such talk helps to diffuse the tension many students feel at being in a "teacherless" class.

Along with these supportive comments were criticisms of content and form. There were great differences in the kinds of comments made in each area and how the writers used the comments. The peer comments on content did give the writer indications that there were some problems in the text. Thus students wrote comments such as "this paper is too short," or "the argument in your paper is a weak one." Though these comments were valid criticisms, students found such comments unhelpful and made few major revisions in response to them. For example, Mark, a participant in the project, wrote his first paper about frisbee playing. He had a good description of the game of frisbee but little about his involvement in the sport. His peers suggested that he put more of himself in his paper and he acknowledged that they were right. However, in his next draft, he did not discuss his personal involvement in more depth. Two possible explanations for why students made few revisions are embodied in a comment made by Mark in his final interview: "In the beginning I resented the peer group process because all they were doing was, you know, criticizing it and that didn't help too much." Mark's comment indicates his resentment at being criticized by someone other than his teacher and his underlying lack of faith in peer criticism. His remark also reflects the lack of revision experience he and his classmates had. Indeed, at this stage, the students could criticize but they could not offer suggestions as to how the writer might solve the problem in the text.

In contrast to the way criticism about content was given and used, peer comments about grammar, punctuation, spelling, or on the lexical/sentential level were much more helpful to the writers. For example, here is a group of students in their first peer group session discussing a student's paper. The writer is Vincent.

Charlie: The next sentence

Vincent: is a run on.

Charlie: Yes. You have four thoughts in there. "There wasn't a store left except for Key food, a fruit store, butcher store," that's one thought. "Others had been raided before the food store off limit cry had gone into effect"-that's a second thought, and you can't put it in parentheses.

Vincent: So I'll put that into a few sentences.

Wilton: I think the use of parentheses is to show second thoughts or side thoughts. You should make separate sentences out of those or use commas. The reader looks at parentheses as an insert.

Vincent: All right.

Charlie: Is this a misplaced modifier? "We spotted a church bazaar?"

Vincent: I don't know what a modifier is.

Charlie: "Right before the toll booth to enter Rockaway, I spotted a church bazaar." Put "church bazaar" before this clause.

Vincent: You mean, put "church bazaar" before "Rockaway?"

I see, I put, "I spotted the church bazaar right before the toll booth to enter Rockaway."

Charlie: Right.

Vincent: That sound's fine.

Charlie: "It turned out to be Las Vegas night." Maybe that shouldn't be a different paragraph.

Bonnie: That's all right. What about the next one?

Vincent: Put the next paragraphs together? Okay.

In their comments on surface level problems, the peers were not only able to pinpoint the problems; they were also able to offer solutions to them. Thus Charlie suggested how to revise a run-on sentence, Wilton commented on Vincent's use of parentheses, and Bonnie suggested a new revision of Vincent's paragraphing.

At the beginning of the semester then, peer comments consisted of expressions of positive support, problem and solution comments on surface level matters, and more limited comments on the conceptual and structural levels. As the semester progressed, the three categories of comments continued to appear in the oral and written responses of the peers. The nature of the evaluative and surface level comments remained unchanged. However, there were noticeable differences in how peers responded to conceptual and structural problems in the text. Instead of just criticizing the writer, they began to offer suggestions as to how he or she might revise a text. For instance, Vincent wrote his fourth essay about the hostage crisis in Iran and suggested that the United States use military force to get the hostages out. After

stating his position, he wrote:

'The U.S had a policy known as "speak softly and carry a big stick." This policy worked very well during the early 1900's. What it entailed was that if any country got out of line, the U.S. would react with military force. But since the U.S. was looked upon by some European countries as being a bully, the U.S. got away from this policy.

Since the U.S. had been using the "Mr. Nice Guy" policy, we lost thousands and thousands of boys in Vietnam. Now we have to be at the mercy of the OPEC nations. Most recently, we had had to sit on pins and needles over the Iran crisis.'

Here is an exchange about this section of the paper:

Charlie: To add a little spice to it, maybe you should give an example of how reacting to military force worked. "In the early 1900's if any country got out of line, the U.S. reacted with military force."

Vincent: You want me to give some examples?

Charlie: Yea, give some examples.

Vincent: Okay.

Charlie: "We have to be at the mercy of the OPEC nations." Put why we've been at the mercy of the OPEC nations. You should examine the situation.

Later in the same paper, Vincent wrote that if the United States stepped in, the Iranians would desert Khomeini for "it is my opinion that only a few Iranians feel the way

Khomeini does and when push comes to shove these radical Iranians would burn their own flag." Roman, a group member, wrote this comment next to Vincent 's statements: "Back up your opinion more strongly." In his next draft, Vincent used his peers' suggestions and gave two examples of U.S. military intervention during the early 1900's and the reason we are dependent on OPEC.

From the examples I have given, it is clear that peer groups can work if teachers are patient as they evolve. Indeed, teachers cannot expect students to miraculously become expert critics and feel comfortable in this new group setting. They need time to develop a sense of trust within the group structure before they are ready to accept and constructively use the comments made by their peers. Furthermore, students need a certain environment in which to develop their critical powers. The students in my study became good critics as a result of their interaction with their peers and because throughout the semester, I interspersed peer group sessions with class sessions about revision strategies they might use when rewriting their papers.

My role as a teacher of revision strategies was a natural one in this class setting. However, other roles which were natural in a regular class did not seem to fit into the scheme of the "teacherless" class. One role which came into question was that of the teacher as evaluator. In this study, the draft process began with peer reviews and at a later stage,

students received comments from their teacher. Sometimes, the students' reactions conflicted with my assessment resulting in confusion in the student writer's mind about which of the comments should be followed. For example, Vincent wrote his first paper about his experiences during the New York City blackout of 1977 when his father's store was nearly looted by rioters. Here is what his peers said about the content of the paper:

Vincent: Okay. Tell me about the substance of the paper.

Wilton: This is a narrative. It is basically A B C D happened. It's not analytical. You can do a narrative.

Charlie: It's not a bad narrative.

Wilton: If it had to be a narrative, it was a good narrative.

Charlie: He reveals it slowly. How his feelings developed. One of the good points about it.

Vincent's peers evidently were satisfied with the content of the paper. However, my evaluation of the essay was entirely different. I thought that while it was in good chronological order, it rambled on for six pages with no particular point to it. I suggested to Vincent that he change the focus of the paper and discuss why people behave in the manner he had described. Because Vincent had gotten a positive response from his peers to hie essay, he was reluctant to make major revisions in response to my comments.

One way to deal with the teacher-peer conflict I have described is not to have peers and teachers evaluate the same paper. Since there may still be some conflict because of the final grade the teacher places on the student paper, teachers might opt for not putting grades on individual papers and instead have a composite grade based on the student's best work of the semester.

Another role which came into question in this kind of class setting was that of the teacher as an audience for her students' writing. In this three stage draft process, students were the initial audience for each other and as a result, excluded me as a reader. For example, students used terminology only their peers could understand or wrote essays which were essentially responses to something another peer had written. Because of this shift in audience, the dialogue which I was accustomed to creating with my students was often subverted by the student to student dialogue which was occuring.

In my research, I have explored in depth how peers interact with each other and suggested some of the problems teachers have in defining their roles in a "teacherless" classroom. I believe that peer response groups should be the subject of further research for even though peer groups are not the panacea for all our students' writing problems, students who participate in such groups learn how to interact with other writers and how to be good critics, and to me, these are important assets for any writer to have.